

Body of War Personalizes Struggles of Wounded Iraq Vets

By Noah Stroeble

Audiences and filmmakers agree that great documentary filmmaking begins and ends with compelling and interesting human subjects, especially living examples of humanity's strengths and vulnerabilities.



Body of War

Tomas Young is one of these people. Two days after the events of September 11th, 2001, he signed up for the United States Army. Like a multitude of young men and women

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around the country, he wanted to be a part of the effort to bring the guilty parties to justice and help secure the country from future attack. In March of 2004, two-and-a-half years after enlisting, Young was shipped to Iraq, where less than a week after he

arrived, he was shot in an unarmored, open-air Humvee in Baghdad’s Sadr City section while responding to fellow soldiers’ calls for help.

Young was instantly paralyzed from the chest down, and his story is one of the focuses of a new documentary film, *Body of War*, co-directed by Austin-based documentary filmmaker Ellen Spiro and daytime television talk show icon, Phil Donahue.

Young’s highly personal struggle to adjust to his disability is interwoven with the larger national story that unfolded in October of 2002 when Congress debated over giving President Bush the authority to declare war. Donahue wanted to depict the other body of war in this film by utilizing an edited down version of C-SPAN’s complete coverage of this Congressional debate. The result is alarming and unmistakable. “You see a script that was bought, read and repeated,” Spiro says.

After meeting Young while he was being treated at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C., Donahue felt compelled to do something. He wanted a seasoned documentary filmmaker to capture Young’s story and was put in contact with Spiro, a one-woman production team whose previous documentary work was grounded in creating trusting, personal relationships with her subjects.

The film picks up with Young’s wedding in the summer of 2005, when Young sees Cindy Sheehan demonstrating in Crawford, Texas, and tells

his fiancé that’s where he would like to go for their honeymoon. Young quickly enters the political spotlight in Crawford, not only because he is a wounded war vet, but also because he is bright, humorous and charismatic.

From Crawford, Young begins the long, arduous journey of transforming his anger and frustration into political action. “Young sees himself as a voice for all the vets who can’t speak their minds in public ... and he does it in a way that is funny and honest,” Spiro says.

The enormity of the war in Iraq is one of the contributing factors in its overall abstraction. The figures detailing the number of American lives lost, the Iraqi civilian fatalities, and a war debt now approaching half a trillion dollars do not bring much clarity to the picture. By peering into the life of Tomas Young and watching it against the backdrop of the larger event that led to his life-altering injury, this abstraction becomes a focused portrait bigger than any anti-war, anti-troop argument. As Spiro puts it, “On the surface, it’s a cause and effect. But when you get down deeper, the film’s about the fragility of the democratic process.” Spiro goes on to say that in the end, the film’s impact is due to Tomas Young himself: “The strength of the film is his willingness to show his vulnerability.” ■

***Body of War* will play SXSW Film Festival on Thursday, March 13, at 4:00 pm at the Paramount Theater. The film will begin playing select theaters nationwide the following day.**

There will also be a *Body of War* showcase as part of the SXSW Music Festival, with Kimya Dawson, Serj Tarkian, Tom Morello and special guests, on Thursday, March 13 at 7:00 pm at Stubb’s.